A Single Decision (Take Two)

By: Timewatch (/u/1698214/Timewatch) (https://www.fanfiction.net/pm2/post.php?uid=1698214)

Follow/Fav

Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
Rated: Fiction T (https://www.fictionratings.com/) - English - Sci-Fi/Friendship - General Grievous, OC - Chapters: 53 - Words: 542,002 - Reviews: 1,397 (/r/11714223/) - Favs: 1,321 - Follows: 1,431 - Updated: Aug 19, 2022 - Published: Jan 4, 2016 - id: 11714223

Chapter 41

Sanya had just gotten back to her little cabin after a shift in the hydroponics bay when the door rang. "Who is it?" she asked, with an exaggeratedly tired sigh.

"I, Harak Murshida, have come," came the deep filtered voice of the Skakoan. Sanya went to open the door.

"Can I help you?" she asked, looking up at the towering behemoth.

"Come with me, Captain Komara and I are going to study the ways of the Force," he said. *Ah, Esera,* thought Sanya. *Maybe it's best I avoid her for a bit.*

"Look, I can barely touch the Force, let alone use it," Sanya told him.

"So what?"

Those two words rattled around in Sanya's head. Of all the responses she'd been expecting, that had not been one of them. "So... what?" was all Sanya could repeat.

"I have only touched the Force in brief moments throughout my seventy-two years of life," Murshida said. "But that will not stop me from seeking understanding. It will not stop you either. Come, let us contemplate the universe we live in."

"Fine," Sanya said, rolling her eyes. *This is going to be stupid. Esera's still going to be upset.*

In one of the many formerly unused, empty rooms aboard *Encounter*, Murshida had built some kind of meditation chamber. It was simple, functional, insulated against the sound of the ship and free of distractions, and warmer than the rest of the ship. Sanya could take off her jacket in here. But it was just the two of them. The big Skakoan checked in with Esera. "Captain, are you alright?" he asked.

"I'm very busy, Mister Murshida," said Esera over the comms. "I won't be able to come to spiritual training for the near future."

Did she know I'd be here? Sanya wondered.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Captain," said Murshida. "But it may be what fate intended. I can see where Sanya is at while you work."

"Wonderful," said Esera. The comm line went off. *Yep, still upset*, thought Sanya. Murshida sat himself down on the padded floor, and Sanya joined him, cross-legged.

"Tell me, Sanya," said the Skakoan. "What is beauty?"

"Uh... aesthetically pleasing things, I guess," Sanya said. "Something the brain notices and likes. Symmetrical, harmonious, pleasurable to see uh... things like that."

"That is a very worldly view."

"I'm a worldly girl."

Murshida laughed. "You are not the Captain, that is for sure. Consider the following: beauty is a window into the divine."

"*Divine?* What's this got to do with the Force?"

"Everything, young Sanya..."

Sanya's assumption that all Skakoans were people of machines and numbers was wildly wrong, it turned out. This was a man of faith and heart, through and through. And while Sanya didn't quite understand everything he said, she was actually interested in knowing more.

The days went on, and the new uniforms for Esera's personal branch of the Separatist military came through. As a civilian contractor, Sanya didn't get one. Neither did Alize, or Murshida, who occupied a strange grey area as a military veteran serving in a military capacity without enlistment or commission. Not that a Skakoan in a pressure suit could wear normal clothes outside of Skako's atmosphere. So ultimately, only Esera, Voyan, and Zule got them. For now.

"Once I bring in some more crew, they'll get the uniforms too," said Voyan. Esera was still hiding in her cabin, working on whatever task Grievous assigned to her, so Alize dragged Voyan and Zule into the mess hall for an impromptu fashion show.

The replacement for Voyen's dirty old grey Trade Federation jumpsuit was something Sanya could believe had come from the royal palace in Raxulon. Which it had. Unlike the uniforms in the Republic fleet, this one was not grey, nor white or black, but a deep, midnight blue. The jacket was double-breasted, with underlying clips holding it closed down its right side; the shoulders bore the Separatist hex icon, six white trapezoids. Beneath the collarless jacket was a high-necked white sweater. *Yeah, definitely made for* this *ship,* thought Sanya. The trousers were the same midnight blue, and went over the boots, inverse of Coruscanti fashion.

"You see," Voyan said to them, holding out his arm, showing them a bizarre geometric pattern woven in gold, "in Tionese tradition, rank is shown on the sleeves, not the chest or shoulders. This goes back to Emperor Xim's sworn warriors, drawn from the steppe riders of Argai, who would wear chords. Every knot in ones' chords was the mark of a battle survived, every loop was an enemy of repute slain. Things have changed since then..." Voyan went on with his history lesson. The long story short was that looped and knotted chords had turned into the complex geometric patterns now used throughout the Tion Cluster to denote rank. The Raxian style eschewed reality in favor of the angular abstractions Voyan now wore on his sleeves.

"So, that means lieutenant?" Sanya asked.

"Commander, actually," Voyan said. "Don't ask why Komara had me skip ranks like that."

"I can't believe you talked me into this," Zule said, looking at the much less complicated *thing* on her sleeves. While Voyan looked alright in his uniform, Zule looked positively dashing. Her orange-red skin contrasted deliciously with the deep blue fabric, and the belt around her jacket emphasized her hourglass figure. *I could get used to that look,* thought Sanya.

"Ensign Xiss, we'll make a proper engineer of you yet," Voyan said.

Alize had her claws on Voyan's shoulders. "I do enjoy a man in a uniform," she said, with a mischievous smirk. "Forty four and thirty aren't so far apart, Miha..."

That got a snicker out of Zule and Sanya alike, while Voyan did his best to keep a straight face.

"This is beginning to look more like a military starship," said Murshida. "Though I must question the practicality of such uniforms in your line of work, commander. And ensign."

"We've got new jumpsuits for actual day-to-day stuff. Pockets without holes, belt loops that aren't coming off, it's going to be great, right, Zule?" asked Voyan.

"Wow, exciting!" Zule said, sarcasm dripping from her voice. "We won't have to wear these blues often, right? I feel a little too close to the ruling class that exploits the workers..."

"Brainwashed," muttered Sanya.

"You watch-" But before Zule could finish, Voyan grabbed her arm and forced it down to her side. Or rather, she let him force her arm down, because there was no way a man as slight as Voyan could have overpowered a Zeltron woman with that much muscle. Maybe they weren't a couple, but Sanya knew there was something more than simple amiability between them.

"You're a professional now, Zule," said Voyan. "Act like it."

"Fine."

"Fine, *sir*." The lieutenant- *commander,* now, looked very pleased with himself at that moment. "I can't play favorites with the future crew around. Even if you are my favorite."

Sanya tugged on Alize's sleeve, until the big Zygerrian leaned down enough for Sanya to whisper: "Okay, *what* is going on between them?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, dear," Alize said. "Back home, a boy and a girl that close would be married by now. But they're not even courting. They just... connect."

"Huh." Sanya hadn't really seen relationships like that. In the Service Corps, members who got along *that* well usually ended up sharing beds for a while. Perhaps the upper Temple ranks had done more damage to Zule's psyche than Sanya realized. A Zeltron going completely against her instincts like Zule was... well, Sanya had never seen anything like it.

"You think Komara will be wearing these trousers?" Zule asked Voyan, lifting a leg and looking over it. She balanced on one foot without even a wobble.

"They exist. I'm sure she's got a pair. But this is Captain Esera Komara we're talking about, do you really think she's *not* going to wear the ankle-length skirt she specifically requested as an option?" Voyan asked. Everyone except Sanya laughed.

I guess this is something she's known for, thought Sanya. *Not that I'd know, since she's avoiding us, just like Voyan said last week...* She still regretted telling the truth. She really did want to help Esera, she owed her that much. But that was impossible with Esera isolating herself from everyone.

What could she have been up to in that cabin of hers, with all those holocrons?

Two weeks ago, Esera would have been delighted to receive her new uniform from the royal tailors of Raxus. And she did like the product, it was excellent. She looked like a proper captain, now. The problem was, it had coincided with the completion of her investigation into Dooku's Sith holocrons. One holocron made in the Jedi style remained but she hadn't opened it. Her investigation and its conclusions weighed too heavily on her, the dark side energy in those holocrons filled her mind, day in and day out. She'd put off the inevitable as long as she could. She'd tried to find other answers. But there was no alternative. The hour came when her numbness outweighed her anxiety.

Esera patched a call in to Grievous, grateful they were in the same star system for once. "I've finished my investigation," she told him, audio-only. "We need to talk."

"You've found something?" asked Grievous.

"More or less," she told him. "This has to be in person, I don't want this on the wireless, no matter how secure these Carammite codes supposedly are."

"Get over here," Grievous said. Within an hour, Esera took *Whirlwind* to *Invisible Hand,* which was still in orbit of Raxus Secundus as Grievous humored Congress down below while no military crises demanded his attention.

Up in his tower, Esera began her briefing to her one-cyborg audience.

"I've finished my investigation into Dooku's communiques with Sidious. Three and a half years or so of records. I've narrowed down the identity of Sidious to several known individuals. One of them is far more likely than the others," said Esera.

"Yes, this is a conversation best held in person," Grievous said. "But I would have preferred a definite answer."

"Just... bear with me, Grievous," Esera told him, trying not to let her exhaustion show. She'd thrown herself into this over the last two weeks. She hadn't spoken to Voyan once as she put the pieces of this puzzle together. He could have all the time he liked with Zule Xiss. That didn't bother her at all, not one bit. What'd *really* hurt her was Sanya's duplicity. That'd come at the worst possible time, on top of Esera sorting through all the meticulously-noted crimes and atrocities Dooku and Sidious had committed, logged in the holocrons like they were checkbooks. The banality of evil was as astounding as it was sickening. And then the one friend she was sure she'd had in this galaxy had turned on her too. Esera was at the end of her rope.

"I am bearing," Grievous said.

Esera sent him the data from her computer directly. "These are all the instances of Sidious mentioning what means he had over the Senate. It goes without saying he had access to every level of power, straight to the top. Sidious was in direct contact with Palpatine."

"That much was obvious."

"I can't use facial recognition software, Sidious used some kind of scrambling algorithm in his transmissions. That shadow over his face isn't actually there in reality."

"It is, actually," Grievous said. "Sith magic."

"Oh." Esera wanted to hit herself. *Of course* the Sith could do something like that.

"Do not scold yourself," the cyborg told her. "You have never met a real Sith. You could not have known. Continue."

Oddly supportive, today. Maybe Grievous could see she wasn't doing well. "Mas Amedda had constant access to Palpatine." Esera put an image of his face up. "But Mas Amedda is a bumbling idiot who got voted out of the chancellorship. I don't think Sidious would be that much of a cretin. He was a yes-man to Palpatine, maybe to Sidious too."

"Agreed."

"There's also Sate Pestage." His image went up. "He appears to have been an adviser to Palpatine, no official status, but the two of them were close. Now he's Vice Chancellor to Tarkin. Pestage certainly *looks* like a Sith. There's nothing to say that's not Sidious, except for the fact he's very much alive, and his behavior hasn't changed at all since Coruscant, when you lost contact with Sidious."

"How do you know this?"

"I have sources too, Grievous," said Esera. She wasn't revealing her Carammite connection yet. "There's a better contender for Sidious's true identity, though. Janus Greejatus." His face joined the others. "A failed politician from Chommel Minor, an associate of Palpatine's going all the way back to his Naboo days. After Amidala ousted him from the Senate, he too ended up as an adviser to the Chancellor. I've recently learned Greejatus is under Jedi surveillance. My sources did some investigating on that, and guess what? Greejatus was making payments to the company that ran the hangar where I found *Whirlwind.* I mean, *Scimitar*. You know, Maul's old ship."

"A very interesting connection," said Grievous, leaning forward in his chair.

"Greejatus could be our Sidious, hiding in plain sight as Palpatine's lackey. Except... he's alive. And hasn't changed his behavior since Coruscant, except for getting closer to Tarkin. Why would he suddenly ignore you once Dooku died? Sidious wouldn't give up the entire Confederacy after controlling it from the shadows for three years, just because his apprentice died." Esera took a deep breath, before things got ridiculous. "Now, there are other options. Sidious could be anyone in the Senate, he could be Padme Amidala or Bail Organa or Orn Free Taa or- I don't know. But none of these people, not even Amidala, were as close to Palpatine as these three." She jerked her thumb at the three faces projected in the air. "And like these three, they're all alive and well. So, who close to Palpatine died at the same time he did? Or at the very least, suffered brain-altering injuries?"

"Who indeed?" asked Grievous.

"No one. Not a single associate of Palpatine's, not a single employee of his, not even the lowest janitor in 500 Republica who'd never even once seen the Chancellor, had a hair on their heads harmed during the Coruscant battle. There is only one person who died that day, one person who links all these people together." Esera put his face up, and waited for the outburst.

"Impossible," said Grievous, looking at Sheev Palpatine's portrait. "You are reaching too far, Komara. My droids shot him in the chest. Do you think Darth Sidious would die to a *battle droid*?"

"Do you think Anakin Skywalker would?" asked Esera.

Grievous was silent. His eyes narrowed, shining gold in the gloom of the chamber.

Esera had rehearsed this part, hoping she'd be able to say it without choking up or getting tears in her eyes. "My master and I had once gone to a space station, investigating a murder. Thirteen year old me had come up with all kinds of crazy ideas to explain the mystery. He listened to everything I had to say, like he always did. Then he told me, the explanation with the fewest assumptions was most likely the correct one. If we wanted to find the murderer, then we should start with the most simple ideas on who it might be. And that's exactly what we did, there were no secret agents or love triangles or conspiracies, just an angry loan shark." She didn't choke up, but her eyes *were* wet at those memories of snooping around a grimy space station, asking questions of drug dealers, prostitutes, and smugglers. It'd been no place for a thirteen year old girl, but she'd never felt in danger for a moment with Olor Callo at her side. Esera turned away to face Sheev Palpatine's portrait, and not Grievous. Normally, she hated how easily memories like that tore her apart, but even those feelings of warmth now lost forever were better than the void she'd been in lately. She went on, her voice unsteady:

"I'm applying the same logic here. Maybe Sidious is a shapeshifting Sith magician, maybe Sidious is a literal nobody so obscure he's not even in the records, maybe Sidious is sitting in a hospital with amnesia- or maybe Sidious is the one person of power and influence we know for a *fact* is dead." Esera took a deep breath, wiped the tears out of her eyes, and turned around again. "That is the explanation with the fewest assumptions, Grievous. Palpatine and Sidious were the same person, and your droids killed him half a year ago. You executed your own master by mistake."

Neither said anything for a time, they just stared each other down. Esera knew he wasn't being idle, his ear-antennae were twitching, and the light in his eyes wasn't just Kaleesh biology, he had his heads-up display active. Finally, Grievous sat up straight. "Do you realize how ridiculous it is that the Jedi would not have been able to sense Palpatine was a Sith lord?" he asked her.

"Grievous, you of everyone should know how fallible the Jedi are," said Esera. "If the Jedi weren't able to sense a Sith lord in direct and constant contact with the Chancellor, there's no way they'd be able to sense the Chancellor *being* a Sith lord. The Jedi are totally blind. They were fumbling around in the dark, informing the target of their hunt about the progress of their hunt for three years. They never had a clue."

"It's impossible," Grievous said again. "There must be another explanation."

"The only other possible explanations become increasingly complex and filled with assumptions we can't prove," said Esera. "I've spent the last week trying to convince myself we don't know enough, we don't have enough proof, but the truth is, I've got all of Dooku's records. *This* is what fits the picture the best, with the least assumptions, and most simplicity. I can bring you the holocrons and you can look for yourself. Everything snaps into place if you know Sidious *was* the Chancellor. Nothing else makes this much sense."

"Why?" Grievous asked, bolting upright from his chair so he could start pacing. He always paced when he was thinking. "Why would Sidious get himself elected as legitimate leader of the Republic, only to split it in two with Dooku's Separatists? What kind of game was he playing?"

"You haven't been paying attention to the politics on the other side of the line," said Esera. "Do you know how much power the office of the Chancellor has amassed? The Republic's constitution is in shreds, the courts are powerless, the Senate is effectively sidelined now that the moffs have direct authority over their oversectors- Grievous, Palpatine was creating a dictatorship right under everyone's noses. They willingly gave him everything because of this war. This whole conflict was orchestrated just to put Sidious at the top and keep him there. Doesn't that masterful manipulation sound like something Sidious could pull off?"

He didn't have an answer for that.

"I don't know what Dooku's thoughts on this all were, he didn't write them down. I don't know what part you- us- the Separatists played in all this. But Sidious and Dooku worked very hard to stop you from crushing the Republic before it could get its economy into war mode and have it look believable, Grievous. You would have won the war within two years if they hadn't been holding you back."

Grievous's mechanical fists curled up as he paced, his eyes smoldered with anger. "I knew that already," he fumed. "I told you as much! Dooku and Sidious were playing a game by rules I didn't know. It was infuriating. But they told me the end of the war was near, before Coruscant. What were they up to?"

"The end of the war *was* near. The Republic had you bottled up in the Outer Rim, besieged on all fronts. In another six months it would have been over. I've discovered nothing in Dooku's records about any kind of long-term Separatist plan," said Esera. "So that's the real question, isn't it? What was *meant* to happen at Coruscant? What did Sidious want from you kidnapping him? Why would Sheev Palpatine, the Dark Lord of the Sith, a known friend to Anakin Skywalker, alleged Chosen One, lure Skywalker to this very chamber, where he killed his apprentice Dooku?"

"I don't know," Grievous said. The pacing went on.

"I think I know. I think Sidious was going to replace Dooku with Skywalker here. Cold-blooded murder is a very dark side thing to do. Palpatine egged him on! Doesn't that make sense if Palpatine is Sidious? Of course he's going to want a loose end like Dooku cleaned up! Of course he'd want to switch out an old man with not much life left for the *Chosen One* in his prime! Skywalker was getting groomed. If you ask me, Grievous, you were meant to die at Coruscant too. You, Dooku, and Obi-wan Kenobi, probably. All of you, with the very best of the Separatist fleet. Palpatine and Skywalker emerge heroes, more beloved than ever by the public. The loose ends–you and Dooku–are gone, Skywalker's *other* mentor is dead, the offensive arm of the Confederacy and its best commanders are wiped out- a perfect, clean victory for the Sith, served on a silver platter. And Sidious is left with the most powerful Force sensitive who ever lived for an apprentice, and a Republic he can do anything he likes with. All it took was a galactic war that wouldn't have happened without him pulling the strings."

Esera had him now, she could feel it. The wheels spun in Grievous's mind as he paced, talons clanking on the metal deck. He was trying to think up another explanation, but nothing came. Every piece slid into place in his mind.

"What about the Jedi?" asked Grievous.

"*You* said it yourself, to Sidious. The Jedi are spread thin across the Outer Rim. He probably had a plan to deal with them, isolated as they are right now," Esera said. "How, though, I can't say. Sidious never even hinted at it. But the Jedi would have been done in, just like you would have. No loose ends. We were all pawns to be thrown away when we were no longer useful."

For a while more, Grievous paced. "It's all in character for him," he finally said. "Sidious was always disposing of anyone he no longer needed. He never left a loose end. I want *proof*, Komara. I want to hold it in my hands and *know*."

"And then what?" she asked. "Tell the whole Galaxy? Let everyone know this entire war was a set-up by a dead man? That it's all been for nothing? That we, the collective Galaxy, got played?"

The cyborg glowered at the wall, realizing how stupid that would be. Esera didn't know what would happen if they told the Galaxy the truth. She'd talked herself in circles in her cabin for days. The war wouldn't stop, no. Men like Tarkin and Grievous would keep it going no matter what. The people fighting for good reasons, for liberty and justice, they might give up. And then who would hold back the monsters who just wanted bloodshed and destruction? Esera hated that good people were dying in this war, but she even more hated the idea of what might happen if good people quit the war. *I'm going to have to lie to everyone,* she had realized. She'd need to keep playing the game of the Sith lord even when the Sith was dead. Esera hadn't even been able to look at herself in her bathroom mirror that day.

"These wretched Sith have played their last game with me!" Grievous seethed. "I will not be had for a fool! Komara, go to Coruscant, and-" He stopped, and hung his head. "No. You're no assassin. You don't have the stomach for murder."

"I might," Esera said. Grievous looked at her. "I can kill, Grievous. I don't like it, on principle, but I don't really feel anything when I do, these days. I could do it. I won't lose any more sleep than I already have." Yes, she could kill, she knew that. The girl named Esera Komara might be killed if she went too far down that path, and something else, something like Grievous might take her place in this body, but that was a small price to pay if she and Grievous had the same idea of what they needed to do. She'd sworn once that she'd never end up like him. But now, here she was, contemplating it.

Grievous closed a fist, and looked out into the stars. "Leave the murder to me. I will not ask you to sacrifice who you are and live without belief. That is a fate worse than death."

"Why not?" asked Esera, hardly believing her ears. "What do I matter?"

"You are the strongest, smartest officer in my service. No matter how silly and impractical your convictions and sentiments are, they have made you who you are. They have made you a woman I respect and trust to do what no one else can. I need *you*, Komara. Not another heartless, soulless machine. Never compromise on what you believe, not even for my sake."

It was as if someone had pulled out the floor from under her. Never had she expected affirmation like that from Grievous. Between those words out of nowhere, the revelation that this entire war was built on lies she had no choice but to perpetuate, and everything that had been happening in her life, lately, Esera's knees felt weak. She lowered herself down to the deck. "Doctor," Grievous said.

"Yes, master?" A-4D answered, clanking out from his office beneath the elevator deck.

"Komara has collapsed."

"I'm fine," Esera said, waving off the horrible doctor droid. "I'm fine, I really am."

A-4D deployed one of his many arms, holding some kind of instrument to her forehead. "Your favorite stray is extremely stressed right now, master. You should put her down, it'd be a mercy."

Esera didn't have the energy to snap back at the droid. She just sat there, and took it.

"Perhaps you need medical leave," said Grievous.

"No, no, I'm fine, I really am. It's just- things are- I don't know. I need something to do. I can't take being cooped up in my head on that ship any longer," Esera said.

"And how long has this been?" Grievous leaned down, almost totally bent over, and he still towered over her.

"Two and a half months, maybe more," said Esera.

"Go down planetside, Komara," Grievous said. He grabbed her under her arms and placed her on her feet. "Breathe the free air under an open sky. Clear your mind. You're no good to me a halfwit."

"Alright," she said, nodding, and only half-believing that this monstrous cyborg wasn't berating her for being weak enough to fall victim to psychological stress. "I'll do that. There's one other thing, Grievous."

"Yes?"

"Please, take the Sith holocrons back. They're getting into my head."

"Very well," said Grievous. "Have them delivered here. Contact me when you've recovered."

Grievous spent the better part of a day in seclusion, going over a thousand different possible identities of the Sith lord. Sheev Palpatine was the one that fit best, just like Komara said. Everyone had been played. The Republic, the Confederacy, Grievous, Tarkin, all of them. Dooku and Sidious had played the Galaxy like it was a board game, orchestrating every move of the war. The pieces came together too well. That disturbed him. And if *he* was disturbed, he could see why a girl like Komara had collapsed under the weight of it.

Too pure by far, thought Grievous. He'd had a daughter, once. Many daughters. But the eldest of them by several years played eleventh mother to the other children. Work, work, work, all she ever did was work, she never thought of herself. When the sanctions came, and famine and plague followed, she'd died first. How long ago was that, now? Eighteen years and a few months? Memories came and went, fuzzy and vague. Grievous could never hold onto them for long. Sometimes, Komara reminded him far too much of that girl. A pure girl, fighting with all the heart she had to stop from sinking into the darkness all around her. Defiant to the last. Komara needed time to breathe, so that didn't happen to her. The old men in his war band had always said the open sky was good for the soul. Grievous hoped she would find some peace beneath it, in the company of whatever gods watched over her.

His mind turned back to Sidious's grand plan, headless, perhaps still to complete itself by its own momentum and catapult Tarkin to galactic ascendancy. "Too complex," Grievous muttered, looking out from the observation deck. "Why is nothing simple? Plans within plans within plans, a million points of failure, and not one of them went. Not until those droids gunned him down." He looked over to the deck panel where Palpatine had died. Where Sidious had died. Shot by an OOM-series security droid. Grievous had executed his own master, by accident.

"And what of you?" he asked the reflection of the machine warrior he saw in the window. "A disposable pawn, played like the rest of them."

Jedi don't bomb shuttles, Komara had told him once, many months ago.

No, maybe Jedi didn't bomb shuttles. But the Jedi had brought those sanctions on Kalee. Sanctions issued by the Senate. Palpatine had been nothing but a young senator from Naboo in those days. *A master and an apprentice... Was Sidious but the apprentice then? Was his master the one orchestrating everything? Or was the Sith rise to power more recent?* He had to believe the Sith had not been pulling strings that far back. He had to believe his grudge with the Jedi was real. He had to believe he was here for a reason. If he lost revenge, there would be truly nothing preserved to him. Without revenge, Grievous would have no purpose.

Once, Grievous had prayed for a guide, many decades ago now. He'd met a girl, who'd grown into a woman, whose name he dared not recall. And then he'd had a daughter, a daughter that had kept him grounded in the world of the living, that daughter dead now for eighteen years. Now, Komara. The little, lost, failed Jedi, the weight of the Galaxy on those small shoulders, barely holding herself together. The third guide the gods had sent him, who hardly knew how to guide herself. *If revenge is not my purpose, then show me what it truly is, Komara,* Grievous thought, and awaited her return with the holocrons.

With the war temporarily at a standstill, the Jedi finally had time to look to other matters. In the last few weeks, Obi-wan Kenobi had put together a follow-up report to his Komara report, regarding the state of the Order's youth. Shaak Ti had been invited to sit in on that Council session for the first time in two months.

"Simply put, the situation is bad. Very bad," said Obi-wan.

Yes, it is, Shaak Ti thought.

"The war has completely disrupted our education procedures. Padawans, young knights, Service Corps youth, even a few older Jedi have developed very warped views on the Jedi Code and the Order's place in the Republic," Obi-wan went on. "I'm not surprised. We've got Jedi as young as fourteen on the front lines. Children don't belong in battle."

"What choice do we have?" asked Ki-Adi. "We've taken such losses. Who would lead the clone troopers without us? Don't tell me you trust Tarkin's officers with a standing army."

There was a round of exchanged glances. "I don't like it either," Mace Windu said. "But we don't have a choice. We've got the reek by its horns, and we have since accepted that army. Letting go is not an option."

Obi-wan grimaced at the reference to that beastly animal he'd encountered in the Geonosis arena. "Be that as it may, we ought to do something about this. The next generation of Jedi is crumbling away as we sit in this tower. I've seen it firsthand."

Ahsoka, Barris, Esera, and poor Sanya too, thought Shaak Ti, a pang in her heart for the agri-corps girl left in the clutches of Grievous on Agamar. *They even say Zule Xiss is still alive out there, brainwashed into an assassin by the Jabiimis.* How many young Jedi had the Order lost through ideological dissent in the last year? How many more would it? And that was on top of the constant casualties, far away in the Outer Rim-

"Master Ti?" a voice was asking.

"My apologies," she said. "What did you say?"

"I think it's time for the Council to assert itself in military affairs," Mace Windu said. "What is your opinion?"

"If by assert itself, you mean stop Tarkin from taking advantage of our younger comrades and enticing them to do terrible things..." Shaak Ti let those words hang in the air.

Windu nodded, and so did Obi-wan. "That's what worries me," Obi-wan said. "We've got so many young knights who are teetering on the edge. Many of them lost their masters before they were truly ready to pass the trials. They're looking for guidance. Are they going to get it from us, or from Tarkin's cronies?"

"Us," Shaak Ti said. "It must be us. Tarkin is dangerous. Maybe even more dangerous than Palpatine."

"Agree, I do," Yoda said, breaking his long silence. "But caution, I urge. Danger is close, I sense."

"Sidious?" asked Ki-Adi.

"Perhaps." Yoda stared into nothing. "Perhaps not."

"I think we should call up Ardabur Aspar again," Obi-wan said. "He's at the middle of Komara's choice to betray us. I don't think he told the truth."

"He didn't seem to be lying, when he talked to us," Kit Fitso said.

"Our ability to use the Force is diminished, and has been for some time now." Mace Windu nodded to Obi-wan. "A second round of questioning would be wise."

"Question him we shall, then," said Yoda.

Shaak Ti had a sudden foreboding feeling. A terrible feeling, only for a moment. *We shouldn't,* she almost said. But as quickly as the premonition came, it faded away, and she'd wondered if she'd even had that feeling at all. During the Council's recess, Obi-wan came up to her.

"Are you feeling alright, Master Ti?" he asked. "You looked distraught, for a moment."

"Just a feeling," she said. "Yoda's right. Danger is close. I don't know what, or from where..."

"Be mindful of your feelings," Obi-wan said. "They can deceive you."

"Yes, of course," said Shaak Ti. "Of course they can."

Seeing Xiss in uniform was strange. Esera looked her up and down. "When did you sign up?" asked Esera. Her sleeves bore the rank of ensign.

"You signed my commission, Komara," said Xiss, eyes narrowed and arms crossed. "You tell me."

Oh. Vaguely, she remembered a message on her computer from Voyan. She'd signed off on it without looking over it. "That's Captain Komara to you, then, ensign."

"Yeah, whatever. Captain. Miha- um, commander Voyan has some new recruits coming aboard. Some of them are prior service, they're gonna want to sign on with their ranks intact."

"Commander Voyan?" When did he get promoted? Why was she only hearing about this from his Zeltron pet? She'd given him full run of the ship, yes, but had he gone behind her back?

"Yes, Commander Voyan. You promoted him up two ranks, remember?" Xiss looked exasperated.

No, Esera did not remember- wait. *Maybe I did,* she thought. He'd once told her the Trade Federation had skipped him over repeatedly for promotion. He'd also told her, more recently, that some of the people he'd be trying to get aboard might outrank him because of that, despite having similar service records. *Yes, I think I did do that,* Esera thought. She'd bumped him up all the way to the rank below hers.

"Uh, Captain?" asked Xiss, waving a hand in front of her face.

"Yes?"

"Commander Voyan needs you to sign off on these transfer orders. He can't approve officers since this isn't his ship. Some kind of regulation." Xiss offered a datapad.

"Alright," said Esera, signing the four forms. "But why didn't he come to me with this personally?"

"Because he's still in Raxulon and you're unreachable by comms. Captain."

Oh. Esera hadn't even been aware he'd left the ship. "And you're not down there with him?"

"I've got responsibilities now. Someone's got to be running engineering. Even if I'm not allowed to touch most things in there by myself."

Esera gave Xiss a long look. Three months ago, Zule Xiss had been a petulant little brat at odds with everyone. Now she was in a uniform, talking about responsibilities, a job, an important job. Entrusted with a starship's main reactor and hyperdrive, however limited her actual abilities were. *What happened to you?* Voyan happened. Esera felt annoyed.

"Captain, I'm not gonna pretend I care about you," said Xiss. "But you do *not* look okay. Are you sick or something?"

"I'm fine. Carry on, ensign."

"Captain." Xiss gave a lazy, half-hearted salute, and they went their separate ways. *At least she's military now, I can give her military discipline,* thought Esera. But the thought gave her no particular pleasure.

Dodging the other people aboard, Esera had some droids gather up all the holocrons. They loaded up *Whirlwind* and Esera was back on course for *Invisible Hand*. Up to the observation deck again, where they deposited the unmarked crates without ceremony, all holocrons accounted for and activated so Grievous could see them for himself. Except one. Esera held the final holocron.

"What is that?" Grievous asked. The cyborg was standing at his window, looking out over the green and gold and blue planet below. All the lights were off, the only illumination came from the planet and the stars beyond. Maybe he could see the holocron through the security cameras.

"This one isn't Sith. This is how we- the Jedi make them, at the Temple. Dooku made this before he joined Sidious. Before he became Tyranus. It's not a records holocron... we used these for teaching."

"Perhaps you should keep it," Grievous said.

"I might as well."

There was silence. He was good at hiding his thoughts. Esera hadn't a clue what he was thinking or even feeling. But she didn't need the Force to see how he stood, back almost straight, hands clasped behind him. Proud. Regal. And Esera realized that in that moment, she was talking with the man who'd been Grievous before they chipped his brain. That was the man who'd spoken to her just a little while before, today.

"What's on your mind?" she asked.

"I am remembering too much of a life now lost to me," Grievous spoke. "I was happy before, to be the mindless butcher. But now no longer."

"I know what you mean. I really do."

That earned her a glance from Grievous. "You had the luxury of being able to walk away, little girl," he said, his voice a deep rumble in the gloom of his lair. "You offered your services to me. But I am bound to far greater powers. There is no escaping the gods."

"There's no escaping the Force, either," Esera told him. "All we get to do is choose what path we take."

"Do we?" Grievous asked. "Everything I have ever done, everything that has ever happened to me, has led me here. And you have been led here, too. Why were you sent to me, Komara? What are you to show me?"

"I don't know," said Esera. "I really don't. Every day I wonder what I'm doing here, why I'm alive, what possible future awaits me besides death and misery. And you know what? I don't have the answers. No one does. Even the Force can only show me glimpses of what *might* be. So... just keep moving forward. The Force, the gods, whatever you believe, it's brought you this far, it'll take you further." Maybe.

"Hmm..." The cyborg turned away again, and resumed his staring. The pensive, melancholy warrior-king of Kalee remained in control. The Separatist madman was suppressed... for now. Esera wished she could think faster. She wished her mind hadn't been such a mess lately. It wasn't often Grievous was this lucid.

"Have you decided what you're going to do? About Sidious?" she asked.

"We will never speak of it to any others," said Grievous. "And we will bring to ruin everything the Sith tried to build. We will have help, yes, but they will not know what we do. This is our pact, Esera Komara."

Rare was it that Grievous used her full name. "This is," she agreed. "Maul's got to go. Greejatus, Pestage, they've got to go. Anyone close to Palpatine who might be in on their plan. We have to hunt them down and destroy them." Esera's spirit sunk at those words, coming out of her mouth. She was speaking like an assassin. A killer. That's not who she wanted to be, but she knew just how easily she could do it. *We both had our childhoods cut short,* Esera thought. *We both have been fighting all our adult lives.* Even if her adult life was so short, and Grievous decades older, it was still true. *I'm what you were when you were my age. You're my future, if this war goes on.* The idea of losing her values and becoming like Grievous scared her. He told her to hold on to what she believed in. But how long could she?

"*I* have to hunt them down and destroy them," Grievous told her. "You never asked for this. I know how it weighs on you. I am not blind. I have tried to help you bear it, to show you what strength lies in your heart, if you but reach for it."

"I'm eighteen years and a few months old, Grievous. I'm not sure how much strength like that I have in me. Sometimes it feels like my foundations are built on sand, you know? I'm just slowly sinking deeper and deeper."

The cyborg looked off into the distance, as if he were listening to something only he could hear. In the Force, his presence became energized, a whirling torrent of emotions she couldn't get a read on, but his voice came low and contemplative: "Ah, I see it now... It is said that victory is Heaven's promise to the righteous. You will be righteous where I cannot be. I will tear this Sith plot out from the Galaxy by its roots. And you will heal the wounds left behind. You will discover your foundations are firmer than you think."

"I'm not much of a healer," Esera said.

"I have a mission for you." That came out of nowhere. "Emberlene is in need of our aid. Go to them. See what you might heal."

"Um, sure," said Esera. "After I go down to the planet?"

"After."

"You seem a lot more confident than you did a few moments ago."

Grievous looked over his shoulder, back at her, golden eyes hard and cold. "I think you have been walking this path longer than you realize. I think you were set on it from the moment you were born."

What's that mean? Esera wanted to ask. But something about that look in his eyes froze her tongue. It would be better to wait, on that question. And with Grievous in such an unusually rational and sane mood, she decided to leave now, on good terms. "I'm going down to Raxus, Grievous. I hope you're right, I hope a clear sky brings a clear mind."

"It will," he told her. "Take that holocron with you. Perhaps you'll learn something from it."

Ardabur Aspar stood before the Jedi Council, as cool as a Rhen Var spring. The young-ish man remained just as bandaged as he had when Obi-wan had met him months ago.

"Young Aspar, rejected surgery, have you?" asked Yoda, pointing his stick at the knight.

"Yes, Master Yoda," said Aspar. "My pride- my *arrogance* caused these injuries. I never want to forget that. Physical beauty means nothing to me, compared to a reminder that I must not become overconfident and reckless."

For one brief moment, Obi-wan wished Anakin could have learned that lesson. But those words were a little *too* perfect. Too humble. "We'd like to go over your Shumavar report, from about seven months ago," said Obi-wan.

"That business?" Aspar's eyes, the only part of his face showing besides his mouth, narrowed. "Is there a new development I should know about?"

"I acquired Admiral Holt's report to the office of the Chancellor," said Obi-wan. "*Your* report mentions precision strikes on Separatist arms and ammunition depots hidden among civilians, which Komara tipped them off about. Holt's report to then-Chancellor Amedda paints a different picture. A general, indiscriminate bombardment. With your signature attached." The masters of the Council looked to each other. This was new information to all of them. Aspar didn't even flinch. "The two of you didn't really think a general like me wouldn't be able to get access to top secret reports, did you?"

"We didn't think it'd take you seven months to get around to looking into it," said Aspar.

"I do believe that's the first true thing you've said to this chamber," Obi-wan said. "You're an excellent liar, Aspar. *Exceptional,* I might say."

"You can't even find the Sith lord you're looking for," Aspar told them, disdain in his eyes. "I could tell you the sky is green and you wouldn't sense my deception. The sky *is* green, masters."

Yoda frowned, Mace Windu looked like he'd seen something disgusting on the floor. But none of them could sense any lie from Aspar, who was lying to their face right now.

"You've come clean very quickly," Shaak Ti said.

"There's no point in looking like an idiot when you have all the evidence," Aspar said. "Yes, I did lie in my report, masters. None of you have the stomach to do what has to be done to win this war. Jedi like me? We all do this. We've all been feeding you the feel-good stories you want to hear, while we keep the rebellion at bay. It is by *our* hands the Republic survives, and your cozy Temple goes untouched by the evils out there."

"Indiscriminate bombardment is an act of evil," Ki-Adi said. "Do you have any idea of how many thousands of innocent people you could have killed?"

"If they were innocent, they would have evacuated," said Aspar. "There is no such thing as an innocent rebel. This is a democracy, masters. Any planet may voice its issues before the Senate, no matter how small it may be. That is their constitutional right. But the moment they take up arms against the legitimate government, they've lost their rights. Secession is unconstitutional, it breaks the government's monopoly of violence. And that monopoly of violence is all that separates us from barbarians like Grievous. You won't find those cretins on Raxus trying to reign him in. They know they've got no control over him."

No one on the Council was immediately prepared to refute that, but Mace Windu rose to the occasion as best he could. "How is what you've done any different from what Grievous does?" he asked.

"I have the backing of the legal government," said Aspar. "That's the only justification I need. You will get no apology or admission of guilt from me. Aside from lying to you, masters, I have done nothing wrong."

"Judges of that, we will be," said Yoda. "Arrest you now, we must."

"You do whatever you need to do, Master Yoda. But you might find I have more support than you realize," Aspar said. He took out his lightsaber, and held it out in an open hand. Yoda took it from him with the Force. Master Drallig himself and the Temple Guard swiftly arrived and escorted Aspar to the holding cells.

"Do you think he was bluffing?" asked Ki-adi.

"No," said Kit Fitso, half someplace else, in memories only he could see. "I don't think he was."

"How many might support him, if this becomes public?" asked Mace Windu.

"Too many," Shaak Ti said.

Obi-wan spoke. "We've got no choice. We must send a clear message. We are not monsters. The Jedi Order is not made of monsters."

"Yes, in agreement, I am," said Yoda. "Let his supporters come forward, we will. Talk to them, we must."

Nothing displeased Tarkin more than an unexpected defeat, except for one thing: dealing with aliens. He swallowed his disgust and forced himself to keep a straight face as he looked at the holograms of the Grand Hutt Council. As vile as they were, he recognized some. Especially Jabba, the biggest, vilest slug of them all.

"The exalted Hutts have not been idle, your excellency," a protocol droid translated. "They grow tired of Grievous's lack of regard for treaties and borders. The rebels go where they please, and cause confusion and delay by starting battles in Hutt trade lanes."

"Yes, the Republic's treaty with the Hutts specifically bars rebel access to your space," Tarkin said. There was no translation into Huttese for that. The Hutts *knew* Basic. They just chose not to speak it. And that drove Tarkin to a silent fury. "We have not requested your direct assistance against the rebels before. Dooku never violated your neutrality. Grievous doesn't seem to care, however."

"The Hutt Council has agreed that the time for action draws near," said the droid. "The uncouth cyborg beast has made a fool of the Hutts. There are whispers the Hutts are weak and frightened. This cannot be allowed."

"No, it cannot." Tarkin touched the tips of his fingers together. "Our supply issues will soon be solved. In another three months we will be ready to begin total war on multiple fronts once more. Can the Republic count on Hutt aid at that time?"

The Hutts spoke to each other, as the feed muted. Jabba gestured violently with his stubby arms. At length, the sound returned, and the droid spoke: "Five months, your excellency. The mighty Hutt clans have not been idle. Since Kashyyyk they have sounded the call to arms in secret. But we lack your resources and organization. Five months, and we will be ready. Of course, there is a price for everything."

"Very good," Tarkin said. "Name your terms."

"The Hutts desire everything within the region outlined by Metalorn, Toola, and Minntooine to be considered their sphere of influence, to do with as they see fit. No questions asked," said the droid. Tarkin made a show of thinking about it. Metalorn and Toola were alien planets, Minntooine was an alien planet, there were many alien planets Tarkin couldn't care less about. But there were Human planets, too. Jabiim and Caramm, tyrannical dictatorships; and the entire Tion Cluster, the Human race's oldest population center in the Outer Rim, older than even the Republic. Ancient enemies of the Republic. Ancient, *ancient* enemies of the Hutts. *Traitors,* Tarkin thought. *Each and every one of them. They threw in their lot with the aliens, they will reap what they have sown.* Tarkin gave the Hutts a cold smile.

"Done."

Whirlwind's cloak stayed up, all the way down to the Raxus Secundus surface. She didn't want questions. Esera aimed for one of the southern continents, where it was winter. Cold air was better than warm air, she thought, for bringing one to one's senses. She'd brought some of her sister's old clothes. Stalimurian attire would be warm enough here. The ship touched down in a valley meadow. No people lived within a hundred kilometers of this place, the scanner picked up nothing, not even abandoned settlements. She would be alone out here, but for *Whirlwind*. The soul of the ship could sense she was troubled, and practically flew herself down.

For the rest of the daylight hours, Esera built herself a little camp. A one-woman tent, a heater, and not much else. *Camping, in the middle of a war,* she thought. No, no thinking. She wasn't here to think.

The low winter sun arced overhead, the wind brushed the needles of the firs and pines and fronds of the ferns not far away. Tall grass, green and lush from the rains, swayed. This place smelled of earth and water, alive and fresh. The clear blue sky stretched on overhead, disappearing behind hills in the distance. All the problems of that terrible galaxy out there seemed far, far away. Esera cooked a little meal on the heater, and had her dinner at sunset. Blue became stained with orange and pink, and then faded into black, as the stars appeared one by one. For a long time, Esera watched them wheel about overhead, before she retired to the tent.

The next day, it rained. Esera watched from the tent, laying on her stomach, chin resting on her hands. She listened to the sound of the droplets on the tent. How long had it been since she'd just stopped to listen to the rain? She wished someone else was here to listen with her. Lonely, that's what she was. Alone and lonely. Esera slept with the smell of wet earth in her nose.

The rain continued through the night, and into the morning, before wearing off in the afternoon. Her mind *was* clearer now, as if the open skies had opened it, and the rains had washed out all that dark side energy that'd built up in her. Esera dared to think again, as she ate her dinner. She thought about the holocron. Dooku's holocron. *What's in there? Why didn't he get rid of it?*

That night, she activated it, not knowing what would be inside.

A hologram appeared, of an elderly, elegant-looking gentleman. Esera had seen his bust in the Jedi Archives a thousand times. "Count Dooku," she said, her voice rough from disuse.

"Oh, hello, young Jedi," the image of Dooku said, smiling kindly. It wasn't really Dooku, only a simulacrum of the man he'd been at the time he'd made it. It would answer as Dooku would have, but it wasn't Dooku. She told herself that to stay calm. "I see you've found my holocron."

"I have," Esera said. A strange tingle went down her spine. *I'm talking to Count Dooku,* she thought, *or as close to Count Dooku as I can ever get... Even if this is from before he fell, it's still weird...* Sitting here in her austere, old-fashioned, and very comfortable Stalimurian dress, she did not feel like a Jedi at all.

Dooku tilted his head. "Does your master know you're opening holocrons?"

"What? No, no, I mean, I'm a Jedi Knight. Yeah, I'm only eighteen, but I am a Jedi Knight. Well, I was a Jedi Knight. And I *was* Master Callo's apprentice." *Was.*

"Olor Callo took an apprentice, after all these years on his own? Delightful! I'm not surprised you've found my holocron, then. Master Jinn and he sought my counsel many times." *Really?* Esera wanted to ask. Never had her master mentioned his contact with Dooku, not once. But Dooku wasn't done: "How is Olor doing?"

Those words made Esera's stomach twist. "He's... no longer with us," she said.

Dooku's face grew somber. "He lived a good life, and he was a true Jedi. A helping hand, a listening ear, a peacemaker. I hope he died as well as he lived."

"He didn't," Esera managed to choke out, trying to blink the tears away. Three days, that's how long Olor Callo had taken to die. Three days that might have saved him, had they the medicine and doctors on that remote moon. Three days, if Esera had been able to heal him with the Force.

"You grieve?" asked Dooku. There was no mockery in his voice, no disdain, not even the dry disapproval towards attachment of the Jedi. Esera looked at his hologram in surprise. "It is not wrong, my child. You are not wrong. What is your name?"

"I'm Esera. Esera Komara."

"Esera Komara..." Dooku stroked his beard. "Yes, I recall that name. You were one of the younglings brought in just before the Naboo incident, back in... 967, was it? I'm pleased to meet you now that you're all grown up, Jedi Knight Esera Komara."

"Uh, likewise," said Esera. Yes, this was really weird. She was having a conversation with a dead man who'd only seen her once as a child. Esera breathed in and out a few times, getting a hold of herself.

"You don't need to hide your feelings from me," Dooku said. "If you feel hurt, then let yourself feel hurt. I do not subscribe to the nonsense Master Yoda has taught us."

"I try not to either," said Esera. She sniffled. "But I don't know what to believe. Or who to believe."

"Tell me, Esera, what do *you* believe?"

"Well... I believe the Jedi Council is blind. The whole Jedi Order is blind. Seriously, they're *blind*, they can't see what's right in front of them." Dooku nodded for her to continue, a twinkle in his eye. "There's something terribly wrong with the Order. It's become stagnant, reactionary. They're so obsessed with maintaining their dogma and status that they can't see what's right in front of their faces! He was right *there*-!" Esera closed her mouth before she said anything more about Sidious.

"No wonder you've come to me," Dooku said. "You're not the first to think this, I reached the same conclusion myself. The Jedi Order is as broken as the Republic. And the Council? They are short-sighted and obstinate. Their refusal to question their ossified ideology will be their downfall."

"I mean... yeah." Esera could only agree to that.

"But you're not here to hear what you already know," continued Dooku. "You're here because you're looking for an answer."

"Yes, I am," said Esera. "I could really use some answers right now. I know this can't be how things always were. Something went wrong along the way. But what is the right way? How do we get there?"

"You're asking the right question, and that's a fine start." Dooku paced about, taking up the attitude of a lecturer. "The Jedi Order has indeed lost its way. In the thousand years since the supposed end of the Sith, it has become stale and moribund. As you said, the Order has become focused on maintaining the status quo, not only for itself but for the Republic as a whole. I daresay that the chief agents of the Republic's corruption, unwitting as they are, *are* the Jedi! They are the self-appointed guardians, aren't they?"

Esera nodded along, that made sense to her.

"We must look back in time to see what we've lost. Before Master Yoda, before Ruusan, before the Sith Empire, before Master Odan-Urr, whose teachings are with us to this very day. Listen to the Code as it was in the ancient days:

Emotion, yet peace.

Ignorance, yet knowledge.

Passion, yet serenity.

Chaos, yet harmony.

Death, yet the Force.

"Does that sound like the Code you were taught, Esera?" Dooku's hologram looked at her pointedly, expecting an answer. Esera recalled the most basic tenets of the code as she'd been taught them:

There is no emotion, there is peace.

There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.

There is no passion, there is serenity.

There is no chaos, there is harmony.

There is no death, there is the Force.

"Yes, the old Code is different," Esera said. "It's less clear, for one."

Dooku smirked. "That is what your predecessors thought. That is what Odan-Urr thought. For thousands of years, we followed Odan-Urr's code. Would you like to know a secret, Esera?"

"I would."

"Everything you've been taught is wrong." For a moment, Dooku stood still, waiting for her reaction. Esera frowned, and she put a hand on her chin.

"I'm not surprised to hear that," she said. *Is this what took you to the dark side, Dooku?*

"You've felt it in your heart, haven't you?" asked Dooku. "That sense that something is off. A feeling that something is not right. Dark thoughts you dare not voice aloud, even when alone. There is a wrongness pervading everything the Jedi Order does."

"I don't think you're incorrect," Esera said, "but... this sounds like a path of thought that'll lead down the dark path."

"Well, it certainly could be!" Dooku said with a laugh. "But only if you let yourself go that way. Keep your balance, my child, and you will weather any temptation."

"Balance..." Esera thought back to her first talk with Murshida. "If you'd permit me, Master Dooku, I'd like to voice my thoughts on the dark side."

"Living dangerously, I see," said Dooku. He gave her an open hand. "Speak, please."

"A... friend of mine talked with me about this once. He's a mystic, and a healer, of sorts, and he's done a lot of meditation. Not a Jedi. We spoke about the Force, and how the natural state of the Force is one of balance. Life and death, self and other, and everything like that." Esera paused to collect her thoughts. "So... when this becomes out of balance, a corruption begins to spread. The dark side is this corruption."

Dooku's eyes lit up, and he leaned forward, excitement on his face. "Yes!" he said, clenching a fist. "That's it, Esera! Give my commendations to this friend of yours as well. I had a whole lecture prepared to help you understand this, but you're already there." Dooku traced his hand in the air, making a circle split by a sinuous line. One side of the line stayed light, one side became dark. "Have you seen this symbol before?"

"I..." There was something familiar about it. Where had she seen it before? Her master had drawn it once, she was sure. "I think I have," she said.

"This is the Force, in one image," Dooku said, slowly spinning the symbol. "From life, flows death, and from death, flows life. The greatest mistake the Jedi Order made was forgetting this. *There is no death, there is the Force*? Ignorance! Remember, the ancient ones said: *Death, yet the Force.* That is the first and hardest lesson to learn, Esera. You cannot have death without life. You cannot have life without death.

"It is the same for the self and other. We were taught as younglings that we must always look outwards, we must be selfless, we must put others before ourselves. And this is not a bad thing," Dooku said, raising a finger. "It is a Jedi's duty to serve others, I do not contest this. But, look at what has happened as the Order has become wholly focused on the other, on the outward: corrupt, decrepit, inflexible- and entirely oblivious to it!"

"Because they're not looking inward," Esera said, as a light went on in her mind. "How can you see the flaws in yourself if you never, uh... what's the word..."

"Introspection is what you speak of," Dooku said, smiling. "My child, masters thrice your age have refused to open their eyes to what you see clear as day. Too much focus on the other makes you blind to your own shortcomings. Too much focus on the self makes you blind to the needs of others. We must have balance." Again, Dooku spun the symbol around in the air. "One flows from the other, back and forth, in harmony."

"But there's chaos too," said Esera.

"Yes, there is. Not everything will always be in harmony. There are times when the balance is upset. We live in such times now. To deny that chaos exists is foolish. And though chaos is all around us now, never forget that we have had harmony once, and one day, harmony will come again. Hope is not yet lost, Esera. Not as long as you believe that, and work to make it true."

Hope is not yet lost, Esera silently repeated. A sense of loss rose in her heart. *How could you have fallen, Dooku?* she wondered. *What drove you to the dark side? What made you forsake this wisdom?*

"The dark side is strong, of late," she said in a quiet voice.

Dooku looked at the symbol floating beside him, and the dark half began to spread into the light half. "The Force is out of balance, the dark side grows ever stronger. It is a cancer, a corruption, consuming everything, creating nothing. The dark side rises when those who would use the Force use it for ill. They act selfishly, they act in despair and rage and hatred, they throw themselves into the abyss."

"Wouldn't it be better to say they slipped into the abyss?" asked Esera. "Throwing oneself is deliberate. I don't think anyone would willingly fall..."

"I would say no," said Dooku, "though I cannot say for sure. There is nothing wrong with feeling sadness, or anger, or even fury. These are natural emotions, they are much a part of us and the Force as joy and love. We have negative emotions for a reason, my child. Without them, the introspection you spoke of would not be possible. It is foolish to deny them, as the Jedi do now. Open yourself to these feelings, but do not let them rule you, do not let them poison you. Do not throw yourself into them. *Emotion, yet Peace,* as the ancients said."

"I never thought about it like that," said Esera. "It sounds easy to fall to the dark side, if you're open to negative kinds of feelings."

"Yes, it is. The dark side will always be the easy path. A Jedi must have the inner strength to overcome that temptation. But it is not strong to deny a part of your soul. In fact, it is weakness. The weakness of the Jedi Order, in hiding from anything that could lead them down the dark path, has made it blind and arrogant. They are becoming as out of balance with the Force as the Sith."

Esera had to sit in silence for a moment, and let those words settle. *The Jedi? Out of balance with the Force?* The very idea seemed absurd. And yet... the galaxy was in flames, billions were dead, and more died every day. How could this have happened under the watch of the Jedi, if they had been in balance with the Force? *It couldn't have,* Esera realized. A chill ran through her, as the implications became clear.

"You're not saying what I think you're saying, are you?" asked Esera. "To be in balance with the Force, we don't have to touch the dark side, do we? You're not saying we should be Grey Jedi, right?"

"Grey Jedi?" Dooku shook his head. "Nonsense. The dark side is evil, there is no nuance about it. Doing evil half the time is still doing evil. A Jedi can never give in to the temptations of the dark side, Esera. Feel your sadness, feel your grief, feel your fury, feel your hate, accept them. That is a part of being alive! But never must you succumb to those feelings. That is your calling as a Jedi. Your heart must be open, more open than any other. But you also must be stronger than any other, you must rise above the call of the dark side. There is no path more difficult than the path of the true Jedi."

Yet again, Esera had to sit quietly and take in all that she was hearing. Everything Dooku said was making sense to her. It made perfect sense. In her heart, she knew what she was hearing was true. The universe seemed bigger and brighter than ever, but all the more intimidating for it. Esera remembered the first time she'd left Coruscant, since her arrival at the Temple. Master Callo and she had gone to some agriworld in the Mid Rim, their mission took them far away from any city. She'd laid in a field, on a moonless night, staring up into a sea of stars that seemed to stretch on forever. Esera could have sworn she was about to fall off the planet and into that vast sky. That was how she felt now.

"I'm scared," Esera said. "If I follow in your footsteps, I might fall to the dark side. I've touched it once already, I never want to again."

"There is no courage without fear," said Dooku. "It is not wrong to be afraid. But..."

"I can't let fear rule me," Esera said.

"You understand."

"How will I know?" asked Esera. "If I open my heart, like you say, how will I know when I start going down the dark path?"

"You must recognize that simply believing you are right does not make you right. There is objective truth in this universe, Esera. Consider your actions, consider your feelings. If you are afraid, or angry, or sad, look inwards. Let those feelings guide you, and find where they are flowing from. Meditate, introspect, re-balance, walk the path to self-mastery. Always remember, you are a living thing, and you are a part of the living Force. You are a part of this world, not something above it! This must be the source of all your actions. Are you immersed in the living Force of this wonderful universe, or are you sealed away in stagnant isolation? Are you acting as a guardian of life, or are you spreading death and ruin for no sake but that of death and ruin? Are your feelings your guides to understanding yourself and the world you live in, or do they control your every action? Being able to look inwards with honesty may be the most important skill a Jedi can have. Everything I'm telling you now, I told your master, once. I'm sure he'd be proud you're thinking so much for yourself, Esera."

Esera didn't want to think about her master right now, even Dooku's mere words brought tears to her eyes again. Instead, thought about what she'd been told, and took a deep breath to stabilize herself. "You said the Jedi are out of balance with the Force... Can you be out of balance with the light side? Can there be too much life?"

A wry smile spread over Dooku's face. "So eager to learn! Consider this: there is no light side. There is the Force. And the Force is a self-correcting system, my child. If you went and had five children, one day, those five children would die- hopefully, long after you are gone! I suppose if everyone in the universe stopped dying, then the Force would stop growing. But there is always life, and there is always death to balance it. It is far easier to destroy than it is to create, though. And that is the root of the corruption we call the dark side. It only consumes, it only takes, it only destroys."

"I see," Esera said. As she saw it, it would be much easier to become out of balance by losing touch with one's self than it would be by creating too much life. Everything did die, in the end. *That's the way of the Force,* thought Esera. "Master Dooku, I have one last question."

"Ask whatever you like," said Dooku.

"You'd realized so much about the nature of the Force, you'd found a way back to the proper Jedi path..." Esera swallowed, nervous at what she had to ask. "So, Master... how did you end up falling to the dark side?"

Dooku smiled again, this time with great sadness. "I have lived a long time, and known much loss and bitterness. My heart grows more closed every year. There is nothing more susceptible to evil than a closed heart, my child."

Esera nodded, and gently shut the holocron. The hologram of Master Dooku flickered into nothing.

Author's note: So, this is an important chapter. Possibly the single most important chapter in the story since Esera linked up with Grievous. I'm interested to see what you readers think about pre-fall Dooku's take on the true Jedi path is. Anyways, three very important things happened here. Two are very obvious. Can you guess what the third is?

And yes, this was a fast update. I had like half of this chapter written when I posted 40 and I finished the rest a few days later. I sat on it for a week and a half to make sure I liked it. Chapter 42 will come in early May.

< Prev | 41. Chapter 41: Esera and the Holocron | Next >

Name:
Type your review for this chapter here...
Post Review
Actions | Share | Follow/Favorite

(//x.com/fictionpress)

ray id: php-api